

# MEMORANDUM

## Introduction to United Front Work

### What is United Front Work?

United front work<sup>1</sup> is a unique blend of engagement, influence activities, and intelligence operations that the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) uses to shape its political environment, including to influence other countries' policy toward the PRC and to gain access to advanced foreign technology.<sup>2</sup> It is carried out by an extensive and well-documented network of organizations operating in parallel to the People's Republic of China's (PRC) foreign ministry and intelligence services that seeks to influence universities, think tanks, civic groups, other prominent individuals and institutions, and public opinion broadly. In April 2023, the CCP mobilized groups based in the United States with ties to its united front organizations, such as Alliance for China's Peaceful Reunification, USA, to join protests against Taiwanese President Tsai Ing-wen during her transit stops in New York and California.<sup>3</sup> Civic groups co-opted by the CCP's united front organizations also assist the PRC in carrying out repressive activities abroad, such as the America Change Association, which housed a secret PRC police station in New York City that was raided by the FBI in October 2022.<sup>4</sup>

### Why Does United Front Work Matter?

United front work is one of the CCP's ways of building and wielding political power at home and abroad and, consequently, receives high-level attention. Every CCP leader from Mao Zedong to Xi Jinping has endorsed its importance for helping the party achieve the "Great Rejuvenation of the Chinese Nation," which includes unifying with Taiwan and establishing a new global order that revolves around CCP values and interests. United front work also is a personal priority of Xi Jinping,<sup>5</sup> and a member of the CCP's highest decision-making body, the Politburo Standing Committee, leads the united front system. United front work damages U.S. interests through legal and illegal technology transfer, surveillance of Chinese diaspora communities, promotion of favorable narratives about the PRC through ostensibly independent voices, and the neutralization or harassment of critics of the CCP. The United States has no direct analogue, and the U.S. Government has struggled to counter united front work with traditional counterintelligence, law enforcement, and diplomatic tools.

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<sup>1</sup> Throughout this memo, "united front work" is not capitalized. "United front work" describes a variety of activities and practices that are not confined to a specific bureaucracy, nor a specific thing, but are, in Xi Jinping's words, "the work of the entire party." The Central United Front Work Department is a capitalized as a proper noun, similar to the PRC Ministry of Foreign Affairs or the Ministry of State Security.

<sup>2</sup> Alex Joske, "The Party Speaks for You, Foreign interference and the Chinese Communist Party's United Front System" Policy Brief Report 32, *Australian Strategic Policy Institute*, June 9, 2020, [https://s3-ap-southeast-2.amazonaws.com/ad-aspi/2020-06/The%20party%20speaks%20for%20you\\_0.pdf?gFHuXyYMR0XuDQOs\\_6JSmrdyk7MralcN=](https://s3-ap-southeast-2.amazonaws.com/ad-aspi/2020-06/The%20party%20speaks%20for%20you_0.pdf?gFHuXyYMR0XuDQOs_6JSmrdyk7MralcN=). Accessed on May 3, 2023.

<sup>3</sup> Jimmy Quinn, "Reputed Chinese Communist Party Front Group Helped Fuel U.S. Protests against Taiwanese President," *National Review*, April 13, 2023.

<sup>4</sup> Josh Rogin, "Chinese Police Stations in NYC Are Part of a Vast Influence Operation," *Washington Post*, April 19, 2023; "110 Overseas: Chinese Transnational Policing Gone Wild," *Safeguard Defenders*, September 2022.

<sup>5</sup> Alex Joske and Peter Mattis, "The Third Magic Weapon: Reforming China's United Front," *War on the Rocks*, June 24, 2019 <https://warontherocks.com/2019/06/the-third-magic-weapon-reforming-chinas-united-front> Accessed on May 12, 2023.

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### How is United Front Work Organized?

The Central United Front Work Department (UFW), which reports directly to the CCP's Central Committee, is the lead organization for coordinating and carrying out united front work both inside and outside of China. It oversees the united front work departments of provincial and local party committees as well as those subordinate to party committees in companies, research institutes, and other entities. The UFW also oversees many subordinate organizations including groups like the National Association for China's Peaceful Reunification, which operates in the Washington, DC, area and Alliance for China's Peaceful Reunification, USA.<sup>6</sup>

The UFW and its affiliated organizations are not the only entities active in united front work. As Xi Jinping explained in August 2022, united front efforts are the "work of the entire party," which require the "close attention and concerted efforts of all party members."<sup>7</sup> In fact, every PRC state ministry has some element that focuses on united front work and its associated influence operations. The CCP also increasingly directs united front influence work at foreign private companies operating in China, some of which have established their own United Front organizations.<sup>8</sup> According to Australian researcher Alex Joske, foreign companies' united front groups maintain close contact with local subordinates of the UFW and have pressured foreign governments like Australia to support Beijing's Belt and Road Initiative.<sup>9</sup>

The united front policy system encompasses united front work departments at every party level; united front elements housed in PRC government agencies, enterprises, academic institutions, and ostensibly non-government organizations; and the network of Chinese People's Political Consultative Conferences from the central to local level.

### UFW's Role in Genocide in Xinjiang and Repression of China's Ethnic Minorities

The UFW also has a major domestic role which includes overseeing the affairs of the PRC's non-communist minor parties and ensuring support for the CCP from China's ethnic minorities, religious groups, non-state-owned businesses, intellectual elites, and China's rising middle class and urban professionals. Notably, the UFW has played a central role in formulating, implementing, and defending policies to "Sinicize" China's ethnic minorities, including the ongoing genocide of the Uyghurs in Xinjiang. In August 2018, when the UN Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination received testimony regarding the ongoing mass detentions of Uyghurs and other Muslim ethnic minorities in Xinjiang, the deputy director-general of the UFW's Xinjiang Bureau denied that detentions were occurring and insisted that "Xinjiang citizens, including the Uyghurs, enjoy equal freedoms and rights."<sup>10</sup>

The CCP also uses united front organizations to monitor members of the Uyghur diaspora, create databases of actionable intelligence, and mobilize diaspora community organizations to counter

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<sup>6</sup> Jimmy Quinn, "Reputed Chinese Communist Party Front Group Helped Fuel U.S. Protests against Taiwanese President," *National Review*, April 13, 2023; Alex Bowe, "China's Overseas United Front Work: Background and Implications for the United States," *US-China Economic and Security Review Commission*, August 24, 2018.

<sup>7</sup> "Xi stresses solidarity of Chinese at home and abroad for national rejuvenation," *China Daily*, August 1, 2022. <https://www.chinadaily.com.cn/a/202208/01/WS62e7433fa310fd2b29e6f830.html>. Accessed on May 3, 2023.

<sup>8</sup> Joske, 2020.

<sup>9</sup> Joske, 2020.

<sup>10</sup> Bowe, 2018.

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international criticism of its Xinjiang policies.<sup>11</sup> In addition to its focus on Xinjiang, the UFWD is responsible for shoring up domestic and international support for the integration of Tibet, Hong Kong, Macau, and Taiwan under CCP rule.

The CCP's efforts to defend its policies both in and outside the PRC has led there to be, as Alex Joske has written, "no clear distinction between domestic and overseas united front work: all bureaus of the UFWD and all areas of united front work involve overseas activities. This is because the key distinction underlying the united front is not between domestic and overseas groups, but between the CCP and everyone else."<sup>12</sup> According to a united front work training manual issued in 2014, the CCP's overseas united front work aims to "unite all forces that can be united" and build an "Iron Great Wall" against "enemy forces abroad."<sup>13</sup> In addition to promoting narratives favorable to the CCP abroad, the UFWD collects intelligence, exerts control over overseas Chinese-language media outlets, seeks to influence Chinese diaspora groups, facilitates illicit technology transfer, and interferes in politics in other countries, including by co-opting and influencing foreign academic, political, and business elites. The networks built by the UFWD are often viewed as prime operating grounds by the PRC's intelligence agencies, which seek to draw on members of united front organizations to support espionage and influence operations, as seen in the recent FBI arrests relating to China's police station in New York City.

### United Front Work Under Xi Jinping

United front work has played a critical and poorly understood role throughout the CCP's history. In its revolutionary era prior to the founding of the People's Republic of China in 1949, united front work was critical for the party's survival and rise by uniting and co-opting domestic and international forces sympathetic to the CCP's cause or at odds with the CCP's enemies. In the post-Mao era, united front work saw a resurgence as the CCP needed broader domestic and international support for developing the Chinese economy. In 1986, Xi Zhongxun, Xi's father and a key leader from the party's earliest days, established a united front work "leading small group."<sup>14</sup>

Since assuming power himself, the younger Xi has once again elevated the stature of united front work.<sup>15</sup> In 2015 Xi established his own "leading small group" to coordinate united front work at the party's highest echelon of power. During the 19<sup>th</sup> Party Congress in 2017, Xi repeated Mao Zedong's description of united front work as a "magic weapon" for the party's success and bringing about the "rejuvenation of the Chinese nation."<sup>16</sup> Illustrating the importance of united front work under Xi, last year's 20<sup>th</sup> Party Congress saw Xi's top ideological theorist, Wang Huning, appointed to lead the

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<sup>11</sup> Lin Li and James Leibold, "Cultivating Friendly Forces: The Chinese Communist Party's Influence Operations in the Xinjiang Diaspora," *Australian Strategic Policy Institute*, Report No. 61/2022.

<sup>12</sup> Joske, 2020.

<sup>13</sup> James Kynge, Lucy Hornby and Jamil Anderlini. "Inside China's Secret 'Magic Weapon' for Worldwide Influence," *Financial Times*, October 26, 2017. <https://www.ft.com/content/fb2b3934-b004-11e7-beba-5521c713abf4>. Accessed on May 3, 2023.

<sup>14</sup> Alex Joske, "The Central United Front Work Leading Small Group: Institutionalizing united front work," *Sinopsis*, June 23, 2019, <https://sinopsis.cz/en/joske-united-front-work-lsg/>. Accessed May 3, 2023.

<sup>15</sup> Joske, 2020.

<sup>16</sup> Alexander Bowe, "China's Overseas United Front Work Background and Implications for the United States," *U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission*, August 24, 2018. [https://www.uscc.gov/sites/default/files/Research/China%27s%20Overseas%20United%20Front%20Work%20-%20Background%20and%20Implications%20for%20US\\_final\\_0.pdf](https://www.uscc.gov/sites/default/files/Research/China%27s%20Overseas%20United%20Front%20Work%20-%20Background%20and%20Implications%20for%20US_final_0.pdf). Accessed on May 3, 2023

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national-level united front system. Wang is perhaps best known for his 1991 book *America Against America*, which critiqued the internal conflict he found at the heart of American society.

Also at the 20<sup>th</sup> Party Congress, Xi made clear “The people’s support is of the utmost political importance, and the united front is an effective instrument for rallying the people’s support and pooling their strength. We will build a broad united front to forge great unity and solidarity, and we will encourage all the sons and daughters of the Chinese nation to dedicate themselves to realizing the Chinese Dream of national rejuvenation.”<sup>17</sup>

### Targets of United Front Work

The CCP targets twelve primary groups through its united front work to bring targeted groups into a “united front” with the CCP under party leadership, neutralizing any opposition. Once those groups and individuals are incorporated into the united front system, they can be used to co-opt and influence others.<sup>18</sup> The twelve groups are as follows:

1. Members of China’s eight minor parties;
2. Individuals without party affiliations;
3. Non-CCP intellectuals;
4. Ethnic minorities;
5. Religious individuals;
6. Individuals of non-public ownership economy (private businesses);
7. Individuals of new social strata (urban professionals);
8. PRC nationals living overseas and individuals returned with overseas education;
9. People of Hong Kong and Macau;
10. People of Taiwan and their relatives in the PRC;
11. Overseas ethnic Chinese (who are not PRC nationals) and their relatives in the PRC; and
12. Any other individuals who need to be united and liaised.<sup>19</sup>

### Recommended Reading

- Alexander Bowe, “[China’s Overseas United Front Work Background and Implications for the United States](#),” *U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission*, August 24, 2018.
- Alex Joske, “[The Party Speaks for You: Foreign Interference and the Chinese Communist Party’s United Front System](#),” Australian Strategic Policy Institute, June 9, 2020.
- Matt Schrader, “[Friends and Enemies: A Framework for Understanding Chinese Political Interference in Democratic Countries](#),” GMF Alliance for Securing Democracy, April 22, 2020.

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<sup>17</sup> “Transcript: President Xi Jinping’s report to China’s 2022 party congress.” *Nikkei Asia*. <https://asia.nikkei.com/Politics/China-s-party-congress/Transcript-President-Xi-Jinping-s-report-to-China-s-2022-party-congress>. Accessed on May 3, 2023.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

<sup>19</sup> Joske, 2020